

PROPER 8, PENTECOST 3, YEAR C, JUNE 26, 2022

Do you know what word in the English language, when placed after a statement, becomes the biggest negative word in our language? The word is but – b u t, as in, I would help you with that project but I have so much on my plate right now. The but is a good way for us to go back on our commitments, our promises, our faithfulness.

We are good at coming up with the butts of life. We are good at giving excuses. Excuses for this and excuses for that, And the best excuses are usually found in church. How about "We want to grow but we don't have enough people to do anything. Or we tried that but we got no results." I would love to serve on the vestry but I'm just too old." Every church person has heard these excuses. Wouldn't it be great if we could kick all the "butts" out of the church! Anytime a sentence contains the word "but" it entirely negates what was said before.

In today's Gospel reading someone came along who indicated an enthusiastic desire to accompany Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." There is the hint of a raised eyebrow in Jesus' reply: "Oh really? You want to follow me? Do you know what that might mean? 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' In other words, are you ready to do without? Are you ready to not know from one day to the next where your next meal is coming from or where you will sleep just to follow me?"

Another joined the march. Jesus invited him, "Follow me." BUT he said, "first, let me go and bury my father." And Jesus gives a very strange reply: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Now another says he wants to come along. "I will follow you, Lord; BUT let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus responds: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Every farmer will tell you that no one can plow a straight furrow without keeping their eyes straight ahead so you can't look back.

What an odd passage and odd responses by Jesus. We almost want to say to Jesus, "What's wrong with their response? Sometimes we do have to bury our dead and you are just going to have to wait. Sometimes we have to say goodbye to those we are leaving and we will catch up to you eventually. Sometimes we have a few things that need tending before we jump on the discipleship bandwagon. Sometimes we just need some time. There's also the point that could be made that isn't it at least a good thing that these folks wanted to follow Jesus? Isn't it better that they want to follow him but just aren't quite ready yet, than not wanting to follow him at all?"

However, let's fast-forward to 2022. Jesus' invitation to "Follow me" is offered to us. The temptation is to respond the same way our ancient friends did. "Lord, I'll be glad to follow, but...but...but... There are so many things that call to us. GOOD things - family, friends, work, and on and on and on. The choices that confronted the would-be disciples on the road were not between good and evil. The choices were between two "goods."

Probably the greatest threat to the gospel is "the good," not "evil." You see the road to following Jesus is not usually blocked by outright rejection. It is blocked by our other loves, mostly good loves too: family, livelihood, career, social acceptance, long-term security, hobbies and recreational interests. We all have our list.

So, what does it mean to really follow Jesus. What is the way to follow Jesus? First of all, to follow Jesus means striving to be like him. And we do that by conforming our actions, conduct, and our lives to his teachings.

Our greatest struggle may not be active resistance to the call of the Christian life. Rather, I believe it is indifference. Ask yourself this question. Would people who met you on Monday know that you had been to church on Sunday. Jesus calls us to a committed life each day. Not only when it is convenient but when it isn't. Not only when we feel good but when it is difficult. Are you a Christian in name only? To be a follower of the way of Jesus is more than just praying or saying the right words. It's about action. It's about promoting who Jesus is and his teachings not your own version that encapsulates your own prejudices.

It is no wonder that religious groups are dwindling. People who say they are spiritual but not religious state they don't want to be involved with religious institutions because they're hypocritical, coercive, exclusive even hateful. How far removed has the church diverged from Jesus' teachings and preach their own version? How would anyone know that you're a follower of Jesus? How do you show your love for others, your compassion, your forgiveness, your kindness to everyone not just who you want too? How do you tell others about Jesus through your words and actions?

I don't know if you've seen these TV ads recently but they're called "He Gets Us". It's a campaign designed to create cultural change in the way people think about Jesus and his relevance in our lives. It all started with a diverse group of people passionate about the authentic Jesus of the Bible. They are not left or right or affiliated with any church or denomination. They simply want everyone to understand and relate to the authentic Jesus as he's depicted in the Bible -- the Jesus of radical forgiveness, compassion, and love. The ads are aimed at young people and address topics such as anxiety, loneliness, broken relationships, outrage, being cancelled.

The ads say things like "Have you ever experienced frustration? Sorrow? Temptation? So has Jesus. Jesus understood what life was like for people in his day -- especially for the marginalized. He was drawn to those on the fringes because he was one too: An immigrant. Homeless. Arrested. Bullied. Through it all, Jesus welcomed outcasts, stood up for women, hung out with troublemakers, even befriended enemies. He did it because of his radical love, empathy, and acceptance for all of us.

Given today's increasingly divisive and mean-spirited world, we're all seeking something better. Isn't Jesus the example we're searching for? As Christians, isn't his example what we should be practicing? Jesus' radical compassion stands in stark contrast to all current hate and intolerance. This is why his teachings, the way he lived, and what he stood for, is what we need to show the world.

So this gospel this morning tells us to get our priorities straight. Build bridges... not walls. Reach out. Replace anger and resentment with acceptance and civility. Live the gospel, don't just listen to it. Don't let another day go by without telling others that the love of Christ lives in you. We Episcopalians are notorious for not telling others about Jesus yet, we are also the best kept secret for those who are looking for a place of inclusivity where everyone is welcome.

Yes, it is challenging. It takes practice. It takes prayer. It takes perseverance. Mother Teresa captured that thought when she wrote: "I have found a paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love."

That is the unqualified love that Jesus calls for. It's tougher love than tough love. It's the tender love of Christ. May we abide in it and ask others to join us in it. Amen.